

Top Ten Indian Spices

Spices, something that perhaps most of us cannot go without these days, have ruled over the minds and hearts of men and women for quite a while now. India, the land of mysteries and tradition, has long been known for its rich collection of spices. Even today, spices would be perhaps one of the foremost things that most of the world would associate with the sub-continent. All images are copyright of www.wikipedia.com and contributing authors available under the GNU Public license.

During the medieval times, several countries of the world became enamored by India as a result of the spices and this often led to the invasions and conquests. Did you know that it is these spices that eventually led to the discovery of the Americas? Anyway, I am not going to go into the 'spice' history in detail and will leave that for a future post. Instead I am going to list what I believe are the top ten spices that are used in Indian food as well as a little bit of history that is related to each. Here is my list of some of the top 10 spices from India.

- GINGER** : Ginger, a perennial plant that adds its own bite to the food and is more of the stem than the root as is commonly believed. Ginger is found all over India and it has a pungent taste that is unmistakable. Ginger besides adding flavor to ones food is also known for its medicinal properties and is used prominently in ayurvedic medicine. It is predominantly used in the form of a paste though also shredded at times. Ginger is used as both fresh and dried forms. It is the fresh ones that render the strong taste in food though. It is used to flavor North-Indian curries as well as the South-Indian favorites - Rasam and Sambar.
- SAFFRON** : Saffron is one of the most delicate spices out there. It is derived by drying the stigma of the flower Saffron Crocus. This spice is used both as a coloring agent as well as as for seasoning certain sweet dishes. Saffron is one of the more expensive spices used in Indian foods. Saffron lends Kheer a quaint yellow color and also imbibes it with the flavor. A few strands of Saffron are first taken and then ground up in a bowl with a small amount of milk. When the milk turns light orange, then it is ready to be added to the Kheer. A special point of interest in Indian cooking, Saffron is always added at the end of the preparation of a dish. This is in contrast to the European dishes like the Paella, where the Saffron is added either at the beginning or half way through.
- GREEN CARDAMOM** : Green Cardamom is a small seed pod with black seeds in the shell. This is used primarily for flavoring anything from drinking water to a cup of Chai (Indian Tea). It is small in size compared to the other cardamom variety but packs a nice aroma inside its pod. The green cardamom is also used in medicine to treat infections of the teeth and the gums. Typically the pod is opened just before the green cardamom is ready to be used.
- BLACK CARDAMOM**: Black Cardamom also known as 'Bada Elachi' (Big Cardamom in Hindi) is well defined by its smoky aroma. It is widely used as a flavoring agent like its green cousin, in a variety of dishes ranging from the erstwhile Biryani to the noodle soup. Its strong pungent aroma makes better suited for the preparation of curries than a kheer. It is stored in the same way as the green cardamom and the pods are released just before adding it to the dish. It is also used in the preparation of the famous Garam Masala, a popular blend of Indian spices, used in several North-Indian dishes.
- CORIANDER POWDER**: Coriander, also known as Cilantro is a herb with a fresh, sweet aroma. The Coriander powder also known as Dhania powder is an essential item in the Indian household. It is used as a flavoring agent in dals and curries. It imparts the dish with its unique aroma of freshness. Coriander seeds are dried up, ground into a powder form after which they are stored in dry packets. Coriander powder is used at the beginning of the preparation of a dish, whereas, Coriander leaves are usually sprinkled as garnish or finishing on top of prepared dishes.
- CINNAMON**: Cinnamon is a spice derived from the bark of an evergreen tree. Cinnamon, yellow-brown in color, is native to India and its uses range from that of a flavoring agent to a medicinal agent. Cinnamon oil can also be prepared from this bark. Cinnamon stick is used in Indian cooking for the preparation of Pulao (also spelled Pilaf at times), Biryanis and certain curries. While using it to cook Pulao, one should sauté the Cinnamon stick in a little bit of oil until the aroma wafts up high. Cinnamon is also used in traditional medicine to treat toothaches and bad breath.
- TURMERIC**: Turmeric is a yellow colored spice, usually used in its powdered form in most South Indian dishes. It is used mainly as a coloring agent in cooking and even a tiny pinch of the turmeric powder is enough to impart the signature color of golden yellow to the entire dish. It is also used as an antiseptic in certain medications. For instance, some families use Turmeric Powder mixed with warm milk to treat colds and sour throat.
- ASAFOETIDA**: Asafoetida, also known as 'the devil's dung' is known for its pungent odor. It originated in the Americas but, in the recent past, seems to have made its home in the sub-continent. Asafoetida is prepared from the sap of a plant which is later dried into a greyish resin like substance. Asafoetida is quite hard and often has to be broken down with the help of a hammer or any other substitute. It adds a special flavor to the Rasams and Sambars of Southern India. Take care to store Asafoetida in air tight containers to avoid your kitchen from smelling like the Devil's dung!
- CUMIN**: Cumin is widely used in Indian kitchens, mainly as a flavoring agent and as a condiment in certain dishes. Evidence of Cumin usage has been found to date from the second millenium B.C. All Curries and Dals have cumin in them in small quantities. It is used in the beginning of the preparation of the dish and as the flames heat the cumin seeds, it starts to release its flavor. Cumin can also be used in the powdered form but for stronger aroma, it is best to use the seeds as they are.
- CURRY LEAF**: Curry leaves are as essential to Indian cooking as bay leaves are to European ones. The curry leaves as well as the oil that is obtained from them are highly prized not just as a flavoring agent but also for the medicinal properties of the oil. You might find it interesting that Curry leaves have nothing to do with the colloquial word 'curry' that is widely used in the western world as a generalization for spicy Indian dishes. These aromatic leaves are best used when they are fresh. They are generally used to flavor a dish right at the end of the preparation. The leaves are crushed by the hand to help release the flavor.

PEPPER - The Eleventh Spice Any discussion about spices is incomplete without the mention of Pepper. It is used prominently around the world including India, but to a limited extent perhaps, compared to other cuisines such as the Italian. Pepper is known as the 'King of all spices' and is believed to have been responsible for making Indian spices famous during the

medieval times. Pepper is derived from the berries of the pepper tree, and they come mainly in two varieties, black pepper and white pepper. Black pepper is slightly different in taste from White pepper, one hits the tip of the tongue where as the other one hits the back of the tongue. The black pepper is the dried berry, whereas the white pepper is just the seed alone. They are used to flavor a variety of dishes from soups to the main courses. We hope that you found this listing helpful. Here's a piece of trivia for you to end this article - Did you know that India also has the only known 'Spice exchange' in the world? In the town of Kochi in Kerala, along the south-west border of the country, there is an exchange market that deals with one spice alone - Pepper. Trading goes on pretty much every day and it's quite interesting to watch. So the next time you are in Kerala, take a breather and pay a visit to their Spice Exchange. Happy cooking!